

Star witness in OKC bombing trials implicated in earlier plot

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A witness confessed to the FBI that he had hired Michael Fortier, Timothy McVeigh and another man to execute a bombing in Kingman, Ariz., - just weeks prior to the truck-bombing at the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, this newspaper has learned.

Yet the FBI never told either McVeigh's or Terry Nichols' attorneys about the witness statements.

Allegations of Fortier's and McVeigh's involvement in a bombing-for-hire of a Kingman residence came to light during FBI interviews conducted shortly after the Oklahoma City attack left 168 persons dead, according to a source present during the interviews.

Former Kingman resident Clark S. Vollmer told federal agents during that interview that he hired Fortier, McVeigh and Dennis Kemp Malzac, "to send a message to someone that owed him money." The message was to be delivered via a bomb detonated at the man's home.

Allegations of Fortier's direct involvement in the Feb. 21, 1995 explosion in Kingman have never been made public until now and could dramatically alter the strategy Oklahoma prosecutors use if Nichols is bound over for trial on mass-murder charges.

A preliminary hearing for Nichols began Monday in Oklahoma City.

Fortier and wife, Lori, were expected to play crucial roles in the Oklahoma case.

Nichols is serving a life-sentence for manslaughter and conspiracy to bomb the Oklahoma City federal building.

McVeigh was executed June 11, 2001 for his role in the 20th century's worst act of terrorism on U.S soil.

Fortier remains in federal custody for lying to the FBI about important details concerning the Oklahoma City conspiracy, transporting stolen firearms to support the crime and failing to warn authorities of the bomb plot in time to stop it.

Fortier is key witness

After agreeing to a plea bargain in exchange for testimony directly linking McVeigh and Nichols to the bombing in Oklahoma, Fortier turned out to be a key witness for the prosecution at the Denver federal trials of his ex-army buddies.

In Fortier's testimony, he presented himself as someone appalled by McVeigh's plan to kill innocents to avenge the deaths of the Branch Davidians at Waco, Texas. Fortier testified that he told McVeigh he would have nothing to do with the plot.

According to McVeigh's trial attorney, Stephen Jones, the FBI did not provide any information about Clark Vollmer's allegations of Fortier's direct involvement in the Kingman bomb plot.

U.S. District Judge Richard Matsch ordered prosecutors to see that the government turned over copies of all evidence collected in the Oklahoma bombing case to lawyers for the accused, and any other evidence connected to the crime.

Jones said evidence the government's star witness sought money to blow up someone's home would have been important for the jury to consider in assessing Fortier's motives for testifying and his credibility.

Jones also said he was not at all surprised to learn the government may have withheld negative information about the most important witness in the case against his client and against Nichols.

"The government had to have both of them, Mike and Lori," he said.

"The case against my client was a shell. The prosecution had to use the Fortiers to present a case that the jury could use to convict."

"Look at the record of these people," Jones said. "Mike and Lori were part of the conspiracy (to bomb the Oklahoma federal building) and admitted as much on the stand. They admitted they sold guns to further the criminal enterprise, they helped store explosives that were used in the crime, they helped create the fake driver's license used to rent the truck that delivered the bomb. Lori Fortier even wrapped blasting caps in Christmas packages that were later used to kill children. And the government cleaned up the Fortiers and presented them as confused bystanders to the crime!"

Source discloses details

From a subject present during Vollmer's interview with FBI agents in Kingman, this newspaper learned that agents were informed that Fortier offered to organize and execute the bombing of a Kingman family's home for cash.

The source explained: "All during the negotiations with Vollmer, McVeigh was a peripheral figure. Mike was the leader in the talks. He was there at the beginning, fully involved. He didn't have to gather the explosives - the others would take care of the details."

The source also said Vollmer told the FBI that that the men he had hired to bomb the Kingman residence also bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City.

"And when all this came up, the FBI agents didn't want to pursue any of that." Instead, the source said: "they (the FBI) tried to steer the discussion away from these connections with Fortier. I was amazed."

This newspaper has also obtained a copy of an audiotape containing Vollmer's comments on many events, including recollections that his credit card and pin number were used by McVeigh and others linked to the Kingman bombing.

On the May 1995 audiotape, recorded in a hospital room by reporter Dave Hawkins - news director for a radio station in Kingman - Vollmer reluctantly acknowledged he knew McVeigh and reiterated a belief that the men who bombed the Francis

McPeak residence were also involved in the Oklahoma City bombing.

The Kingman bombing

On Feb. 21, 1995, local, state and federal authorities responded to an emergency call from a modest frame home on the outskirts of Kingman where they discovered a bomb crater in the backyard of the residence.

Francis "Rocky" McPeak, his wife and three children occupied the rented house.

The shaken family explained to authorities that around 5:30 a.m. a loud explosion awakened them.

While there were no injuries to family members, the powerful blast blew out several windows and tore interior doors off. Kitchen cabinets and dishes along the side of the house nearest the bomb crater were scattered everywhere.

"For several minutes after the bomb exploded, we could smell what we thought was gunpowder," McPeak told authorities.

A subsequent investigation by local and federal law enforcement confirmed the explosive device detonated at the McPeak residence was made from ammonia-nitrate, fuel oil and dynamite. A much larger but similar bomb would be used a few weeks later in Oklahoma City.

McPeak also told authorities he suspected a business associate was trying to send a message to him.

Interview notes obtained by the Gazette detail McPeak's suspicions that Clark Vollmer, a well-known Kingman drug dealer, was behind the bombing. The victim said the two recently had a falling-out over a business deal.

Vollmer, a 41-year-old quadriplegic confined to a wheelchair, was immediately interviewed by police but denied any role in the crime.

Only after a much larger ammonia-nitrate and fuel oil bomb exploded in Oklahoma City - perpetrated by suspects with links to Kingman - did authorities show any interest in the Feb. 21 incident.

FBI arrives

Beginning with FBI agents pounding on the couple's door - two days after the Oklahoma bombing - Fortier and his wife Lori came under intense pressure from the government to tell what they knew about the crime in Oklahoma City and close friend. McVeigh.

McVeigh had been a regular visitor to the Fortier mobile home.

Sometimes McVeigh would stay for weeks at a time.

When the government raided the property, the FBI found a large amount of radical literature in an empty bedroom that the Fortiers said was McVeigh's. Federal agents also discovered Fortier hid bomb-making components similar to those used in the federal building attack.

During a series of interviews with the FBI, Fortier was reminded that he and his wife could be charged with first-degree murder for roles in the conspiracy.

Along with the non-stop official pressure, media interest in the Fortiers created havoc in the couple's neighborhood. Scores of news trucks lined both sides of the street in the modest mobile home park.

On his television, Vollmer watched events unfold in Oklahoma and a neighborhood he was known to frequent in Kingman.

Before the bombing in Oklahoma, Vollmer had visited the Fortiers' residence. Neighbors also recall Vollmer calling on James Rosencrans' - another of McVeigh's associates and the Fortiers' next-door neighbor.

Ghosts of early suspects

Just hours after McVeigh was linked to the Oklahoma City crime and his photographs were flashed around the globe, Vollmer suddenly moved out of his comfortable Kingman residence and checked into a nearby motel - using his real name, but an out-of-state address.

A month later, authorities would locate Vollmer at a Kingman hospital, convalescing and complaining of ulcers.

The same week the FBI showed this sudden interest in Vollmer and the Feb. 21 bombing, agents also made the arrests of Dennis Malzac and his Oatman, Ariz., roommate, Steve Colbern.

Colbern's capture turned out to be the most publicized event since McVeigh's arrest.

Headlines sizzled with allegations that the former medical lab researcher at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in California was a prime suspect in the Oklahoma City bombing.

Several national news organizations speculated that Colbern might even be the mastermind behind the construction of the truck bomb used in Oklahoma City.

On May 12, 1995, Colbern was a federal fugitive when a team of U.S. marshals wrestled him to the ground on the main street of tiny Oatman.

The government had a warrant for Colbern for failing to appear after a 1994 arrest for possession of illegal weapons.

Rather than go to court, the 35-year-old quit his job at the highly respected medical center and moved to Bullhead City, near Kingman.

After a short stay in a vacation home owned by his affluent parents, the UCLA-educated biochemist took up residence in a cave in nearby Oatman - a tourist trap on historic Route 66, where approximately 100 people eke out a living.

When gold prices are good, minors working in the gold mine on the edge of town keep the area somewhat prosperous. But when gold prices fall, the mine is closed and tourists provide what few jobs there are.

In the spring of 1995, Colbern took a job as a dishwasher in a restaurant on main street. Locals recall that he shocked people with his vehement anti-government and anti-Semitic views.

After his arrest, several who knew him said Colbern had radical neo-Nazi beliefs and was affiliated with the infamous Arizona Patriots militia group.

Articles also appeared in newspapers and on television linking Colbern to a hobby that dated back to his college days at UCLA - building ammonia-nitrate bombs.

After Colbern lived for a time in a cave near Oatman, he established residency in a mobile home with Dennis Malzac - an unemployed blaster with years of mining experience.

When authorities raided the trailer they found what they said was evidence of a meth-lab and a large cache of firearms and ammunition.

Colbern's boss at the restaurant said his dishwasher told him in early April he was going to California to visit his family and needed time off. That was two weeks before the bombing in Oklahoma City.

But on the evening of Colbern's arrest, his father told a cable news anchor that he and his wife had not seen their son in several months.

After the arrest, Colbern's lawyer said his client had no information about the Oklahoma terrorist attack, but did concede the client knew bombing suspect McVeigh.

During this period Colbern's roommate, Dennis Malzac, 37, was charged along with Vollmer for roles in the Feb. 21 bombing of the McPeak residence.

Malzac immediately confessed to a role in the Kingman bombing. During subsequent interviews with authorities he also admitted there were a couple of other men involved in the bombing-for-hire scheme. The problem was: Malzac just couldn't recall the names of his co-conspirators. Authorities didn't press the issue and a plea deal was quickly made.

Malzac did admit that he knew how to make the Kingman bomb because he was a miner with special training in ammonia-nitrate blasting techniques.

Needing money to support his drug habit, Malzac also said he only agreed to do the job for Vollmer because of the payday that went with the deal.

When national reporters asked the Justice Department if there were any connections between the Feb. 21 bombing and the April 19 holocaust in Oklahoma City, government spokespersons said they doubted so.

Eventually Colbern, Malzac and Vollmer were given relatively short sentences for their various criminal acts. All were released four years later.

Attorney Stephen Jones said this new information may be the 'missing link' in the construction of the bomb.

"There has always been a large hole in the Oklahoma City bombing case. Who built the bomb? McVeigh certainly didn't have any experience. Mike Fortier admitted in court that he went to the desert with McVeigh a short time before the bombing in Oklahoma City and tried out a small device and it didn't work. So the question is: Who educated these people?"

In 1995, Rocky McPeak was called to Oklahoma City to appear before the grand jury empanelled to investigate the bombing of the federal building.

According to notes one grand juror secretly made, McPeak admitted during his testimony to being a friend of McVeigh's, and he testified about some of the events reported here.

The grand juror noted that during McPeak's testimony, the government sought to link McVeigh to the Feb. 21 Kingman bombing and his use of ammonia-nitrate bomb in the crime. McPeak told grand jurors that he believed McVeigh was part of the Feb. 21 conspiracy, saying he drove by Clark Vollmer's house after the bomb exploded and saw McVeigh and another man standing on the porch of Vollmer's home.

Fortier's name was not raised by prosecutors during McPeak's questioning. On the same day indictments in the Oklahoma City bombing case were made public, the government announced a plea deal with Fortier. He and his wife testified in Denver that only McVeigh and Nichols were involved in the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma.